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**Cruising to a New Reality? Indonesia's Desire to Become  
a Global Maritime Fulcrum and the Challenges they Face**

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### **Abstract**

#### *Cruising to a New Reality? Indonesia's Desire to Become a Global Maritime Fulcrum and the Challenges they Face*

Indonesia can become a positive influence in the region and act as an effective counterbalance to China, but they are at a strategic crossroad. Indonesia seeks a reliable partner and its aspirations to become a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) may provide an opportunity that is mutually beneficial for the U.S. and Indonesia. If Indonesia is to become a global leader and achieve its GMF ambitions, then it will need to consider a strategic partnership with the United States. The U.S. and Indonesia can maintain balance in the IndoPacific by working together to understand the strategic landscape, address GMF key challenges, and develop a strategic partnership. Not only can the U.S. help Jakarta achieve its goals, but once accomplished, the U.S. and Indonesia can engage in a relationship that supports regional maritime stability.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen China synchronize its Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) instruments of national power to gain influence throughout the world. Beijing's coordinated efforts across the DIME result in significant challenges for the U.S. and its IndoPacific partners. Consequently, regional powers and the U.S. are at risk of losing unfettered access to free and open seas in the IndoPacific. Tough choices lay ahead and the U.S. must find innovative solutions to the problems it faces.<sup>1</sup> To sustain a competitive advantage in the maritime domain, the U.S. requires a reliable partner in the IndoPacific with similar values and objectives. Simply put, the U.S. cannot do it alone.

Indonesia has emerged as a key player within the IndoPacific and offers great potential because of shared democratic principles such as human rights and self-determination. Additionally, Jakarta's goals of maintaining strategic balance in the region closely aligns with U.S. efforts to preserve a free and open IndoPacific. Indonesia is actively pursuing ways to strengthen its navy to protect national interests and ensure the free flow of trade and commerce. Moreover, they have stated a vision and plan of action to become a Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) to increase its national prowess both regionally and globally.

Indonesia can become a positive influence in the region and act as an effective counterbalance to China, but they are at a strategic crossroad. Indonesia seeks a reliable partner and its aspirations to become a GMF may provide an opportunity that is mutually beneficial for the U.S. and Indonesia. If Indonesia is to become a global leader and achieve its GMF ambitions, then it will need to consider a strategic partnership with the United States. The U.S. and Indonesia can maintain balance in the IndoPacific by working together to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Maybus, *A Cooperative Strategy*, Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of the Navy, March 2015, 24.

strategic landscape, address GMF key challenges, and develop a strategic partnership. Not only can the U.S. help Jakarta achieve its goals, but once accomplished, the U.S. and Indonesia can engage in a relationship that supports regional maritime stability.

## **MAIN BODY**

### **Strategic Landscape**

#### *Maritime Ambitions*

Indonesia's maritime ambitions reflect its readiness to play a more significant role on the world stage. President Widodo made the archipelagic state's aspirations clear during his 2015 visit to the White House, where he and President Obama issued a joint statement introducing the GMF concept that outlined Indonesia's desire to project influence beyond its domestic borders.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of GMF are modernization efforts aimed at transforming Indonesia's navy into a credible global force capable of advancing diplomatic efforts at home and abroad.<sup>3</sup> In the Obama-Widodo statement, both countries formally recognized Indonesia's aim to "become a Global Maritime Fulcrum" and affirmed "Indonesia's leadership in regional and global fora in concert with U.S. policies to promote peace, prosperity, stability, and security in the Asia-Pacific Region [IndoPacific]."<sup>4</sup> President Widodo's historic visit to the White House signaled Indonesia's willingness to chart a new path and advance an enduring relationship with the U.S. to support Indonesia's future maritime vision.

Indonesia's GMF statement was an expression of its past culture and future ambitions. GMF is a strategic concept aimed at recognizing Indonesia's maritime traditions and charting a

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<sup>2</sup> The White House Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Indonesia," accessed Aug 28, 2018. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/26/joint-statement-united-states-america-and-republic-indonesia>.

<sup>3</sup> Dhiana Puspitawati, "Urgent Need for National Maritime Security Arrangement in Indonesia: Towards Global Maritime Fulcrum," *Indonesia Journal of International Law* 14, no.3 (2017): 321.

<sup>4</sup> White House, "Joint Statement."

course to establish itself as an internationally relevant maritime force.<sup>5</sup> The five pillars of President Widodo's GMF include rebuilding maritime culture, managing marine resources, developing maritime infrastructure, projecting maritime diplomacy, and building maritime defense."<sup>6</sup> By declaring its GMF aspirations, President Widodo reinforces a fundamental naval concept that an overarching strategy must be applied and tied to a political endstate.<sup>7</sup> The tying of naval actions to political objectives is a crucial step in achieving Jakarta's maritime goals, and provides an opportunity for the U.S. and Indonesia to work together towards achieving GMF's maritime diplomacy and maritime defense components.

### *The China Challenge*

Indonesia has enjoyed relative insulation from Beijing's political and military expansion, but now finds itself increasingly impacted by China's actions in the region. China seeks to intensify its presence beyond its borders by influencing nations on its periphery.<sup>8</sup> Indonesia has traditionally been on the margins, but as China expands its power through military and economic reach, China's encroachment is becoming more evident.<sup>9</sup> China's fishing fleets continue to push further south from its mainland, violating Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) near Natuna Island, and forcing Indonesia's navy to clash with Chinese fishing trawlers and Coast Guard vessels.<sup>10</sup> Once concerned with domestic maritime issues, Indonesia finds itself in a

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<sup>5</sup> Puspitawati, "Urgent Need," 321.

<sup>6</sup> Collin Koh, "What Next for the Indonesian Navy? Challenges and Prospects for Attaining the Minimum Essential Force by 2024," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 37, no. 3 (2015): 433.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 25.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2017," Washington, DC: Department of Defense, May 15, 2017. II.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, II.

<sup>10</sup> "Annoyed in Natuna; Indonesia and the South China Sea," *The Economist* 420, no. 8996 (2016): 35, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2016/07/02/annoyed-in-natuna>.

position where its navy may need to confront a modern People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) to defend Indonesia's sovereignty in a resource-rich EEZ.

China's expansionist goals have manifested through an increase in PLA-N resources and capabilities. China has transformed the PLA-N into a force capable of power projection and has demonstrated a willingness to use that force in conjunction with other instruments of national power to gain concessions from IndoPacific countries.<sup>11</sup> Beijing has "in recent years...adopted a coercive approach to deal with several disputes that continue over maritime features and ownership of potentially rich offshore oil and gas deposits."<sup>12</sup> The PLA-N currently has more than 300 vessels capable of conducting domestic defense and global power projection.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Indonesia's modernization efforts under the GMF are timely and offer a strategic opportunity for U.S. partnership to counterbalance against increasing PLA-N capabilities.

### **Global Maritime Fulcrum**

#### *Reconciliations: Key Challenges Facing the GMF*

Indonesia requires a credible naval force to protect and maintain the significant maritime resources that it possesses. Just as important to the archipelagic nation are the capabilities of its naval force when coupled with the maritime traditions and responsibilities to protect its EEZ.<sup>14</sup> Indonesia's maritime resources, including fisheries and underwater gas reserves, contribute to its wealth and are key to current and future prosperity. These resources are the primary reason that Indonesia has a strong navy and its economic and military strength are important factors in establishing regional influence.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, the naval forces required to protect Indonesia's

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<sup>11</sup> OSD, "Military and Security Developments," 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Koh, "What's Next," 434.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 434.

maritime resources also hinder its ability to look outward. Indonesia needs to strike the right balance between maintaining resources, developing forces to maintain regional influence, and projecting seapower to enhance global status.

The Indonesian navy, Tentara Nasional Indonesia-Angkatan Laut (TNI-AL), faces challenges and opportunities as it seeks to fulfill domestic defense requirements and simultaneously develop a navy capable of projecting force to gain diplomatic influence. TNI-AL's core missions consist of protecting maritime resources, combatting piracy, and preventing the illegal exploitation of Indonesia's maritime environment.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, TNI-AL is responsible for managing Transit Zones in the Straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar, where over half of the world's merchant tonnage transits annually.<sup>17</sup> The brunt and increasingly contentious part of TNI-AL's mission is its responsibility for managing and enforcing the resources within its EEZ while also acting as a buffer to protect national interests.<sup>18</sup> TNI-AL's missions, coupled with President Widodo's vision of a GMF, requires its navy to reconcile responsibilities with aspirations and fully commit to GMF solutions to realize its ambitions of transforming into a modern naval force capable of projecting power beyond its EEZ.

TNI-AL requires strategic thinking to resolve historical greenwater responsibilities with its aspirations to develop bluewater capabilities. One can modify existing definitions to delineate a greenwater navy as "able to carry out drug enforcement, fisheries, and domestic defense within territorial waters," and a bluewater navy as "capable of conducting and sustaining long-term

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<sup>16</sup> Sean Quirk and John Bradford, "Maritime Fulcrum: A New U.S. Opportunity to Engage Indonesia," *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Pacific Forum*, 15, no.9 (2015), 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Puspitawati, "Urgent Need," 327.

operations outside of territorial waters in defense of a sovereign's international policies."<sup>19</sup>

Focusing on the latter gets at the crux of accomplishing the projection aspect of GMF and provides the U.S. with an opportunity to share 240 years of bluewater naval experience.

To fully realize its potential and operationalize GMF, TNI-AL must reconcile greenwater responsibilities with bluewater ambitions to project power. As Koh points out, "The aspirations are twofold...with the primary purposes...to ensure the security of its EEZ and...contribute on the world stage by projecting power," albeit for limited durations, to support international operations that align with national objectives.<sup>20</sup> Indonesia's ability to project power is not without precedence, and its maritime contributions to United Nations peacekeeping missions in Lebanon, operations against Somali pirates, and involvement in multi-lateral maritime exercises illustrate TNI-ALs ability to operate beyond its borders.<sup>21</sup> The classic dilemma for Indonesia is balancing its global aspirations against more practical concerns, such as illegal fishing, which costs Indonesia billions of dollars each year.<sup>22</sup> The TNI-AL must seek ways to reconcile current capabilities and requirements with the political pressure to expand its force structure and missions to play a more global role. More specifically, Indonesia should consider adjusting foreign policy goals and focus on developing strategic partnerships to overcome the obstacles that prevent fulfilling GMF ambitions.

#### *Fully Commit: GMF Solutions and Way Ahead*

Indonesia must be uncompromising in its efforts to enhance bluewater capabilities in support of power projection. The U.S. Secretary of the Navy defines power projection as "the

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<sup>19</sup> Koh, "What's Next," 435.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 435.

<sup>21</sup> Quirk and Bradford, "Maritime Fulcrum," 6.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Johnson, "Drawn into the Fray: Indonesia's Natuna Islands Meet China's Long Gaze South," *Asian Affairs, an American Review* 24, no. 3 (Fall, 1997): 155.

ability of a nation to apply all or some of its elements of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, or economic—to respond to crises, contribute to deterrence, and enhance regional stability.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, employing naval forces to impact geopolitical events is an essential prerequisite to gaining influence throughout the world.<sup>24</sup> Indonesia has already proven that it is willing to project power to protect domestic interests, but a key concept of power projection is whether the government is also willing to respond to crises and enhance regional stability in concert with other nations, especially in the face of China’s objections. Indonesia’s willingness to push against China’s encroachment in Natuna was a crucial indicator that it is indeed ready to become a global player, but TNI-AL needs investment, strategic leadership, and reprioritization of resources to fully achieve their maritime goals.

Indonesia’s navy requires significant investment, and the U.S. can provide resources and experiences to help guide manning, training, and equipping. Koh points out that the TNI-AL has immense responsibilities while simultaneously being asked to undertake revolutionary change.<sup>25</sup> The question is whether the navy will be able to rise to the challenge and if politicians and the public will support shifting economic resources to achieve national maritime aspirations.<sup>26</sup> China’s encroachment and increasingly confrontational approach may open the door for U.S. partnership and provide the impetus for Jakarta to intensify investment so that TNI-AL can address a common threat.

Strategic communication is an important component of GMF success. TNI-AL must explain the importance of Indonesia’s maritime culture and articulate risks to political leadership and the public when competing against other military services for funding. Historically, the

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<sup>23</sup> Maybus, *Cooperative Strategy*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Till, *Seapower*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Koh, “What’s Next,” 434.

<sup>26</sup> Koh, “What’s Next,” 434.

Indonesian army has been seen as the dominant service and is a key influencer within the government and amongst the populace.<sup>27</sup> Indonesia must balance its maritime ambitions and satisfy the requirements imposed by the army, where history shows an uneasy tension between the two.<sup>28</sup> With strong political and military leadership, a top-down message emphasizing GMF importance may allow Jakarta to shift inter-service resources to achieve maritime ambitions.

The challenge to TNI-AL achieving GMF is immense but not insurmountable. From securing Indonesia's EEZ to defending against internal and external threats, the TNI-AL has struggled to carry out its maritime obligations while also moving towards modernizing equipment and tactics.<sup>29</sup> Its internal commitments are vast, with a host of missions such as commerce and fisheries enforcement spread over 93,000 square kilometers.<sup>30</sup> Indonesia's vast array of maritime responsibilities proves problematic, but TNI-AL may be able to work with other parts of the government. As Vego asserts, "Navies...can be employed in routine activities in peacetime, operations short of war, low-intensity conflict, and high-intensity conventional war...However, a navy, no matter how strong, cannot carry out all the tasks alone."<sup>31</sup> Indonesia can mitigate challenges by gaining greater maritime domain awareness to focus the limited resources on potential threats or violations within the EEZ. Domestic requirements need not be a mission solely for the navy and Jakarta should redistribute tasks to the Coast Guard or even local law enforcement. Although not insignificant, the TNI-AL is more than capable of patrolling these areas, fulfilling domestic maritime commitments and incrementally modernizing its maritime force.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 452.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Raymond, "Naval Modernization in Southeast Asia: Under the Shadow of Army Dominance?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 39, no. 1 (04, 2017): 157, <http://dx.doi.org.usnwc.idm.oclc.org/10.1355/cs39-1e>.

<sup>29</sup> Quirk and Bradford, "Maritime Fulcrum," 6.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, "Drawn into the Fray," 153.

<sup>31</sup> Milan Vego, "On Naval Power," *Joint Force Quarterly* 59, (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, 2008): 9.

### **Future Implications: Strategic U.S. - Indonesia Partnership**

Regional stability in the IndoPacific may hinge on Indonesia successfully achieving GMF, and its efforts provide the U.S. with opportunities to engage a like-minded partner. U.S. support of Indonesia's modernization efforts can be seen as an economy of force because it would be far less costly than building a separate fleet of ships to counterbalance China's efforts in the region. As Till describes, investing and maintaining a navy requires significant resources and capital investments.<sup>32</sup> Though often described in the context of a decisive battle, Till's concepts reinforce the age-long maxim of a weaker power blunting a larger and more capable force.<sup>33</sup> TNI-AL is capable of blunting China's expansion, but operationalizing a nation's maritime vision requires significant resources and Jakarta should consider U.S. partnership to align international priorities and offset the costs associated with becoming a global maritime power.

Indonesia is capable of overcoming shortfalls in equipment and technology so long as the geo-strategic environment is right. This means aligning diplomatic objectives and having the political will to frame a strategic environment that is advantageous to nations who are willing to challenge the status quo against China.<sup>34</sup> A country's maritime strategy is evolutionary, and some could argue iterative as well.<sup>35</sup> The time it takes for Indonesia to develop its capabilities makes it even more crucial that the U.S. and partners within the region set the conditions for Jakarta's success within the region. As is the case in Indonesia, the maritime strategy should be tied to larger objectives to successfully employ its navy.

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<sup>32</sup> Till, *Seapower*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Till, *Seapower*, 150.

<sup>35</sup> Till, *Seapower*, 26.

It is imperative the U.S. work with like-minded partners such as Indonesia to challenge potential military adversaries. The U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff emphasizes that there is little room for error, recently stating “in past conflicts there were opportunities to absorb costs and recover if something went wrong. Today, that cannot be assumed, and our strategic decision-making processes must adapt to keep pace.”<sup>36</sup> While certainly looking towards the application of the U.S. joint force, Chairman Dunford’s assertions are equally important towards leveraging all instruments of national power and ensuring partners and allies can, if called upon, quickly synchronize into the combined fight.

Indonesia’s GMF illustrates that they are at a strategic crossroad and may be a key U.S. partner for improving regional stability. The challenge is how to support Indonesia’s GMF, in concert with U.S. policies while maintaining regional balance. Secretary of the Navy, Ray Maybus, acknowledges that the U.S. must leverage the shared interests of partners and strengthen cooperation to capitalize on areas that serve mutually beneficial ends.<sup>37</sup> GMF provides the U.S. with an ideal opportunity to assist Indonesia’s desire to project power, and the resulting partnership will undoubtedly promote regional stability.

### COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

Some may argue that Indonesia faces too many obstacles, making it incapable of achieving GMF and acting as an effective counterbalance to China. For example, defense spending is a key indicator of Indonesia’s ability to meet current military requirements while also modernizing. Current defense spending in Indonesia is less than 1% of Gross Domestic Product

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Dunford, “The Character of War and Strategic Landscape Have Changed,” Joint Force Quarterly 89, (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter, April 2018), 24.

<sup>37</sup> Maybus, *A Cooperative Strategy*, 13.

(GDP), approximately \$8 billion.<sup>38</sup> By comparison, China's current military spending as a percentage of its GDP is approximately 2% at over \$200 billion, and the U.S. is at 3.6 %, or \$869 billion.<sup>39</sup> Koh posits that 1.5 % of the GDP is required to achieve TNI-AL modernization and meet existing requirements.<sup>40</sup> Given current and projected military expenditures, Indonesia may not have the political and economic wherewithal to support modernization efforts aimed at global power projection. Indonesia's shortfalls make it even more crucial that they consider developing a strategic partnership with the U.S. to help overcome GMF obstacles.

Justifying budget expenditures on expeditionary capabilities is especially difficult given Indonesia's geo-political position, not just within the maritime domain, but also for its approach to great power competition. Koh points out that Indonesia understands its dependence on others and is wary of co-option by great powers.<sup>41</sup> Indonesia's sensitivity to being used as a proxy has led Jakarta to adopt a non-aligned status, potentially hindering outside assistance to achieve GMF.<sup>42</sup> China's incursions into Indonesia's EEZ may provide Jakarta the impetus to push beyond its current posture of political restraint and make it easier to justify increased partnership with the U.S. to counter potential threats.

### **CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recent years have seen China coordinate efforts to limit the maritime influence of U.S. and regional powers in the IndoPacific. Several nations in the IndoPacific have the capabilities and desire to exercise maritime powers, but they must also balance these aspirations within a

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<sup>38</sup> The World Bank, "Indonesia Defense Spending," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Armaments and Military Expenditures, accessed Oct 14, 2018. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.CD?locations=ID>.

<sup>39</sup> The World Bank, "U.S. and China Defense Spending," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Armaments and Military Expenditures, accessed Sep 15, 2018. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ms.mil.xpnd.gd.zs>.

<sup>40</sup> Koh, "What's Next," 451.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 435.

<sup>42</sup> Quirk and Bradford, "Maritime Fulcrum," 3.

strategic environment increasingly defined by China's influence across the DIME. The U.S. requires strategic partnerships to counter an increasingly belligerent China, and Indonesia offers great potential because of shared values and objectives. It is imperative that the U.S. work with like-minded partners such as Indonesia to challenge potential military adversaries. Indonesia's nautical traditions and reliance on the sea require them to project power and confront any nation who threatens their resources. With the help of the U.S. and making GMF a priority, Indonesia and the U.S. should emerge as stronger partners within the IndoPacific.

Indonesia seeks to gain relevance within the region and across the globe by achieving a GMF that allows it to project power and confront any nation that poses a threat. Indonesia is setting an example for others in the region by standing firm against China's expansionist tendencies.<sup>43</sup> Indonesia has consistently demonstrated the capability to conduct maritime security operations in its waters while also showing determination to challenge China's belligerence.<sup>44</sup> Jakarta's resolve is no accident and illustrates its willingness to follow through on President Widodo's pledge to increase influence in the region. Its ability to carry out domestic missions and challenge China regionally are important indicators of Jakarta's determination to become a Global Maritime Fulcrum.

Indonesia can become a positive influence in the region. Its ability to develop into a capable partner and global leader may ultimately prove aspirational unless the U.S. and Indonesia are willing to work together to help fully realize GMF ambitions. Indonesia needs a reliable partner and its desire to become a GMF may prove mutually beneficial for the U.S. and Indonesia. The archipelagic nation's incremental steps to achieve GMF is significant and

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<sup>43</sup> Raul Pedroza, "The Bull in the China Shop and Rising Tensions in the Asia Pacific Region," Newport, RI: Naval War College, International Law Studies, 90 INT'L L, STUD 66, 2014, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Quirk and Bradford, "Maritime Fulcrum," 5-8.

provides the U.S. with an opportunity to partner with TNI-AL to help both nations achieve its goals. Indonesia's geostrategic position and actions will allow it to shape a positive narrative within the IndoPacific, and Jakarta's movement towards GMF will act as an effective counterbalance to China and open new possibilities for U.S. strategic partnership.

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